The Difficult Part: Emotional Support for Clients  
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A diagnosis of cancer is an emotional and difficult time for pet owners. Veterinarians, nurses, and other practice staff assist the owner and extended family of the pet throughout the cancer journey. This can be confronting, demanding and often very sad work. In order for veterinary staff to work therapeutically with bereaved pet owners, an understanding of grief and loss theories is essential. Good communication skills can also assist veterinary practice staff to most effectively support owners at this time.

The Impact of a Cancer Diagnosis

Cancer is a word often associated with sadness, pain and death. Upon being told their pet has cancer a family has to face a time of making difficult decisions, providing extra care to their pet, financial burdens, and anticipation of the potential loss. In addition the relationship between the pet and its owners is likely to change, perhaps from that of companion, to one of patient. Pet owners will require ongoing support through the process of cancer management to assist them to deal with these difficulties. The veterinary practice staff is in a unique and privileged position to make a difference- not only to animals but also to those who care for them.

The Human-Animal Bond

Recognition of the importance of the human-animal bond has had a major impact on veterinary medicine leading to an understanding that health professionals must not only care for animals but also be mindful of the emotions of the owner. As pet ownership continues to increase many animals are considered an integral part of families. Some studies suggest that a growing number of companion animals are considered surrogate children, and that the loss of a pet could be equivalent to the grief experienced following the loss of a child. Other literature questions the tendency to relate human –animal relationships to human –human relationships and warns that this can pathologise and diminish the understanding of this relationship.

Assuming knowledge of a pet-owner relationship based on previous experience, or other factors such as age or social or cultural circumstances should be avoided. Just as the animal-human bond is unique, every pet-owner bond is different. A 2000 study of pet owners who had recently had a pet die showed that 82% of participants believed that the degree of attachment they had for their animal was the determining factor in the amount of grief they were experiencing. Taking the time to explore the pet-owner bond with a client will be valuable when working with them on an ongoing basis.

Grief and Loss

Grief reactions are experienced in the context of all major life changes such as divorce, changing locations and the death of a loved one. No expression of grief is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. There is considerable literature available on grief and loss theories. In 1969 Kubler-Ross...
famously identified five stages of grief; denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. More recent literature redefines this somewhat by describing a number of different phases that people may go through, often returning to a phase many times. Herbert describes four phases of uncomplicated grieving; numbness, yearning, disorganization and despair, and reorganization.

Generally the grieving process starts at the point of a cancer diagnosis. Initially the grief may be related to the loss of health, guilt over not recognizing symptoms, concern over lifestyle changes and disbelief that a previously healthy animal has become unwell. If the patient becomes terminal the owner begins to grieve for the impending loss and starts to consider difficult issues such as euthanasia and pain management, telling other family members, and preparing for the loss. After a pet’s death the owner mourns the loss of companionship. At any time through the cancer journey the owner may be experiencing a mixture of different emotions.

Some of the reactions that may be experienced by owners are:

**Shock**
This can mean feeling emotionally numb and a refusal to believe what is happening. This is frequently a person’s first reaction to upsetting news as it can form a protective barrier of sorts as the person attempts to process or make sense of the information. It is not unusual for an owner to require information to be repeated at some stage after their initial consultation, because of inability to remember what was said at the time.

**Anger**
People may direct anger at themselves or others. Often members of the veterinary practice will be targets of anger as people try to find somebody to blame. People may show signs of irritation, agitation or even aggression. Anger is not uncommon at any stage of the grieving process.

**Sadness**
Extreme and overwhelming sadness is not uncommon. People can become listless and withdrawn, and cry easily.

**Guilt**
Guilt can be an overwhelming and often irrational feeling. Many people feel guilty after the death of a pet, whether or not there was anything they could have done differently.

**Yearning**
This is characterized by an intense longing for the lost pet. Some people experience physical pain such as aching arms as they long to hold their pet again.

**Physical Reactions**
This may include changes in appetite, sleep disturbances, fatigue, nausea, tightness in the chest, headaches and digestive problems. It is also possible for a bereaved person to suffer from auditory or visual hallucinations, and believe they have seen or heard their pet after he or she has died.

**Anxiety and Depression**
It is important to be aware of the difference between ‘normal’ grief reactions and clinical mental health disorders. It is possible for a bereaved person to develop a depressive disorder or anxiety that requires medical and/or psychological intervention. An existing condition may also be exacerbated. If a person is showing signs of extreme depression or suicidality or is experiencing prolonged and severe grief reactions referral should be made to an appropriate health professional.
How the Veterinary Cancer Care Team Can Help

A recent study showed that 30% of participants experienced severe grief in the months following the death of a pet. The risk factors identified for severe grief were level of attachment of the owner to their pet, euthanasia, societal attitudes towards pet death, and professional support from the veterinary team.

The veterinary team “must be mindful that their approach to caring for a client whose pet has died has the potential to alleviate or aggravate grief.” Veterinarians and practice staff should take the time to consider what would be most helpful to them in a crisis. Kindness, compassion and a respectful attitude are very important. While every client is unique and it is important that the team tailor its response to suit the individual, there are some basic skills that the health care team can employ.

Compassion
By showing concern and a caring manner, workers can immediately convey a sense to the owner that they are in a supportive environment. A smile, a patient manner and a kind tone of voice will all put a client at ease and increase their sense of being understood.

Validate and Normalize
The veterinary team can show by their words and manner that an owner’s feelings are legitimate and understandable. Allow owners to speak about how they are feeling and show an acceptance and understanding of these feelings. Let people know that others have felt the same way in the past.

Encourage the Expression of Feelings
It is both understandable and acceptable to cry at this time. Allow the owner to speak about the personal effects of the situation.

Address the Practical
Clients may be feeling overwhelmed by practical issues such as care for the animal or financial issues. It may be necessary to address these issues first before owners can consider their emotional needs.

Empower Owners to Actively Participate in Their Pet’s Care
This includes enabling clients to make informed decisions. To make a difficult decision, people require information. It may be necessary to supply this information a number of times, and in a written form that they can refer back to. The amount of information required will vary from client to client. An owner will frequently ask for the veterinary practice staff’s personal opinion, and will often use this to help inform their decision.

Privacy
Respect clients by allowing them to speak with clinicians away from other pet owners and staff. If possible an area should be set aside to allow people time on their own, or for families time to speak with one another privately. If an owner is distressed attempt to provide an alternative way out of the building other than through the waiting area. Have respect for the fact that people may need time alone to reflect before making any decisions.

Prepare the Owner In Advance for What Is To Come
Discuss the possible scenarios. If euthanasia is considered, describe what will happen and what the owner may see should they choose to be present.

Assess Support Needs
Most people will not ask for help or support. Owners may wish to avoid the stigma of admitting to distress. It is helpful if the veterinary practice staff is able to identify this and offer support, even if it is not being asked for.
Reinforce Existing Support Networks
Encourage clients to enlist the support of family and friends or other supports if they have them such as therapists or social clubs.

Respect Spiritual Beliefs and Values
Ask the owner about their beliefs. Phrases such as “Fluffy is in heaven” can be either comforting or entirely inappropriate, depending upon a person’s beliefs. People from diverse cultural backgrounds may have special needs.

Do Not Make Promises You Can’t Keep
Never assure a pet owner of an outcome. Phrases such as “I assure you we will do everything in our power to help” can be reassuring without making guarantees or promises about the end result.

Support throughout the Journey
While some stages in the cancer journey may be more difficult, such as diagnosis, terminating treatment, palliation and euthanasia, owners may require support at any time. After death, support is increasingly considered the role of the veterinarian and veterinary support staff. Depending upon the constraints of the practice, it may be appropriate to send a card or flowers. In any case follow up telephone or email support should be a part of good practice. If possible, the bill for services should be sent at a later date, rather than presented to the client at the time of bereavement.

Societal Attitudes
The attitude of those surrounding a pet owner may impact on grieving. There can be a stigma surrounding the mourning for the loss or illness of an animal. Some people cannot understand the relationship the owner has had with a pet and cannot equate the loss of a pet with other losses. This is sometimes referred to as disenfranchised grief. By not acknowledging the grief over the loss of a loved animal, those surrounding a bereaved owner are contributing to the sense of devastation and causing the owner to feel isolated and alone. People may be told by well meaning friends or relatives, “it’s only a dog”, “thank goodness it wasn’t one of your family members”, or “you can always get another one”. The veterinary team may be the main or only point of support or validation for the grieving owner.

Counseling
There are an increasing number of services providing therapy related to the loss of a pet. Providing a list of any local counselors’ names at the time of bereavement not only assists people to access support but provides validation that the grief is legitimate, whether or not they actually use the service. This should be raised sensitively, for example, one could say, “You have had a lot happen in a short time. Some of our clients have found it helpful to have the names of people they can talk to if they need”. In larger urban areas there may be support groups for those who have suffered the loss of a pet.

Children
Children experience grief and their reactions are as varied as those of adults. Societal attitudes have often dictated in the past that children must be protected from bad news. Many adults will recall being told, as a child, that their cat ran away, or their dog went to live on a farm, only to realize as they grew older that the pet had died. Current thought suggests that keeping children in the dark can be emotionally damaging; children tend to be aware that something is happening but that it is being kept from them. They then imagine the worst possible outcome. They feel unsupported and betrayed when they eventually discover the truth.8
The age of the children will affect their understanding of the loss. Children up to the age of four years old do not understand the permanency of death and may believe the pet is going to return. They may exhibit some behavior changes such as clinging or acting out in response to the loss. Five to ten year olds are starting to understand that death is permanent. Children at this age often require a lot of information about what is happening. Adolescents generally have a similar understanding of death to adults but may react more strongly, exhibiting signs of intense distress, social withdrawal or mood swings. Children can be encouraged to be a part of the dying process with their pet. With issues such as viewing of the body and presence during procedures the veterinarian should be guided by the parents and the child.

**Elderly Owners**

Elderly pet owners have reported that the loss of a pet revives memories of past bereavements. It may also remind the elderly person of personal frailties and impending demise. Elderly owners are less likely than younger people, with children in the home, to get a new pet. For some elderly people the pet may have provided a sense of being needed. A pet also gives some stability and routine to daily activities. Some pets may signify a connection to a deceased partner, and the loss of the pet may cause memories of the loss of the partner to be relived.

**Memorials**

Some owners may be fearful of seeing a dead body. Others may wish to spend some time alone with their pet after it has died. Some may wish to have the veterinary practice dispose of the body and others may wish to arrange for burial or cremation personally. A funeral or memorial of some type helps people to say goodbye to a pet, and also allows them to acknowledge and celebrate the pet’s life. Talking through the range of options available can be a helpful part of the grieving process. These may be varied, and can include taking photographs and locks of fur, planting a tree on the burial site, writing a poem or song, having a plaque made and conducting a service with family and friends. While some requests may seem unusual, it is the role of the veterinary staff to assist with this wherever possible.

**Communication**

The relationship with a client can be quite significant over the lifetime of a pet, and particularly so at the end of life. The veterinary practice staff must have an understanding of where the owner is in the grieving process and what he or she may be experiencing. This involves having difficult conversations about topics people usually prefer not to discuss, such as death and dying, or euthanasia. These conversations take place at a time when people are vulnerable, emotional, and being asked to make difficult decisions. It is therefore essential that veterinary staff communicate well with their clients. Good communication will lead to the provision of optimal patient care.

*Why Is Good Communication Important?*

1. Communication is an essential component of good practice.
2. Legal and ethical requirements require accurate documentation and consultation e.g. informed consent.
3. Owners require both information and support. This can be delivered most effectively through good communication with the veterinary cancer care team.
4. The veterinary cancer care team is most productive when its members communicate well with one another. This also reduces stress among team members, and mistakes or misunderstandings are less likely.
Pet owners enter a veterinary practice generally in a vulnerable or disadvantaged position. They are concerned for their pet, unfamiliar with the surroundings, and see the staff as experts. They may be afraid or embarrassed to ask questions. One of the most important components of a therapeutic client relationship is trust. The veterinary practice staff can gain the trust of an owner by employing a consistent and caring attitude, displaying competence and confidence with their pet and being honest and open in all dealings.

The Communication Network

There may be numerous different professionals giving advice to a pet owner. Sometimes this information will be presented in slightly different ways. When the owner then repeats this information to other family members he or she may present it differently again, due to a lack of understanding, an omission of a piece of the information or bias due to the way they are feeling. It is not uncommon for people to end up with a very different interpretation from the original information given. This is another good reason to provide some written information.

When Communication Is Difficult

Maintaining good communication with clients is not always easy. Some people will be more difficult to deal with than others. Some of the things that can get in the way of good communication for veterinary practice staff are:

1. Workload, stress and time constraints.
2. Emotionally challenging situations.
3. Language or cultural differences.
4. Clients with unrealistic expectations or very high needs.
5. Over-identifying with a client, or finding that a situation triggers an emotional response in themselves due to similarities in the case and the veterinary practice staff’s own life or similarities between the patient and their own pet.
6. Assumption by the veterinary practice staff that the owner will tell them how they are feeling.
7. A work environment that doesn’t encourage veterinarians and staff to communicate adequately with clients (e.g. too noisy, no space available or over-scheduled).

Some of the barriers preventing owners from communicating with the veterinary cancer care team may be:

1. Not wishing to be a burden.
2. A belief that nothing can be done.
3. Not wanting to upset people.
4. A fear of talking about dying.
5. Social stigma.
6. Not wanting to reveal weakness.

How Can Veterinary Practice Staff Improve Their Communication Skills With Clients?

1. Reflect on attitudes and responses. Try not to be dismissive, defensive or over-familiar.
2. Provide information clearly. Avoid medical terms and jargon. Use clear everyday language.
3. Encourage questions.
4. Write down complex information, with diagrams if necessary.
5. Check the client understands regularly.
6. Repeat and summarize. People may require information to be repeated a number of times, and on different visits.
7. Be mindful of language and cultural barriers.
8. Be mindful of physical barriers such as auditory or visual problems.
9. Encourage support persons to be present.
Some Useful Communication Skills

Active Listening

Listening is an essential communication skill. It is important to pay attention to what an owner is saying, and to observe non-verbal cues as well. These may include pauses, lack of eye contact, and repetition of phrases.

Ask Open Questions

People can respond very differently to the same question, depending upon how the question is framed. For example, “You’d like to go ahead with the chemotherapy wouldn’t you?” only requires a yes or no response. If the question were asked, “What are your feelings about treatment options?” a number of things can be elicited. The owner would have the opportunity to talk through concerns about the treatment, and ask further questions. A useful initial question to raise the issue of emotional support might be “What has been the impact of this diagnosis on yourself and your family?”.

Not everybody is naturally good at communicating. Good communication skills can be learnt and improved upon with practice. Veterinary practice staff with good communication skills can greatly assist clients during times of crisis and loss. An understanding of the grief process and a caring, empathic manner is essential. Working with cancer patients is exhausting and emotionally draining. There is however, the opportunity for the veterinary practice staff to have meaningful and rewarding relationships with clients, to provide a supportive treatment environment, and to provide comfortable end of life care.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks go to our good friend Nicole Edwards, BSW, Social Worker in Cancer Services for her assistance in developing this material.

References

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